The Cleveland Museum of Art

Press Release

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Visions of Love and Life: Pre-Raphaelite Art from the Birmingham Collection, England
May 31 - July 16, 1995

The first exhibition of England's most famous collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings travels to the United States and goes on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Wednesday, May 31, 1995. **Visions of Love and Life: Pre-Raphaelite Art from the Birmingham Collection, England**, is a memoir of passionate young artists and their models, mistresses, wives, and lovers.

More than 100 works of art--mostly paintings and drawings, and also sculpture and stained glass windows--make up this unique exhibition. They have been chosen from the remarkable collections of the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, of Birmingham, England. The institution was born of its city's 19th-century industrial prosperity. The belief that inspired it--that industrialists and designers needed examples of great art and design to inspire their own labors--played a comparable part in the establishment of the Cleveland Museum a generation later.

In 1848, seven young British artists began calling themselves the "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood." The ungainly term, "Pre-Raphaelite," declared their conviction that art made before the time of the 16th-century Italian master Raphael was pure, while existing academic British painting was bankrupt. Their dissatisfactions went beyond British art to the inequities of British society, which was then undergoing profound changes. As the Industrial Revolution brought millions of rural workers to the cities, where they swelled the ranks of the urban poor, a new middle class grew wealthy.

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A return to pure and simple virtues was the goal these earnest and ardent young men set for their secret "Brotherhood." They were barely more than students and none older than twenty-three. With youthful enthusiasm, they hoped to recapture the clarity and spiritual purity of earlier art and times. Through noble subjects, simple compositions, bright colors, scrupulous observation of nature, and convincing naturalism, they set out to revive spirituality and morality.

Three of these young men emerged at the outset as the Brotherhood's central figures: William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), John Everett Millais (1829-96), and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82). Others significantly associated with the group--as mentors, colleagues, or disciples--included painters Ford Madox Brown, Walter Howell Deverell, and Edward Burne-Jones, the critic John Ruskin, and the designer William Morris. Until the end of the 19th century, Pre-Raphaelitism in its many guises affected every aspect of British life and art.

The early and explicitly religious works by Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti were not popular, and the Brotherhood soon turned to literary subjects drawn from medieval legends, Shakespeare, and Dante. As John Ruskin's influential criticism drew favorable attention to the group, other artists were absorbed, bringing new themes and styles. Increasingly the work of the new grouping became highly charged exercises in sensuality. No longer a secret society but still calling themselves Pre-Raphaelites, they were led by Rossetti and included Brown, Burne-Jones, Morris, and Frederick Sandys.

Life and art are intimately linked in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, which visually express concerns that troubled a newly industrialized society and are still powerful today: the struggles to balance pleasure and responsibility, idealism and eroticism, social class and national identity. Later Pre-Raphaelite work shows links to such international art movements as Art Nouveau and Symbolism, but the movement never lost its original impulse--to challenge the moral and aesthetic standards of Victorian England.

Millais's *The Blind Girl* is one of the exhibition's masterpieces. Its subjects are both the poor blind girl and the pleasures of vision denied to her: the brilliant glow of the English countryside after a rainstorm, with a glorious double rainbow in the stormy purple sky. Hunt's original chalk portrait of Rossetti as a young man, which was famous for capturing Rossetti's intense good looks, was copied in oil after Rossetti's death; it is another startling achievement from the Birmingham collection. Rossetti is also represented by stained glass windows he designed for William Morris's company; the subject--St. George slaying a dragon and setting free a princess--sums up the Pre-Raphaelite devotion to British history, the Middle Ages, and Christian imagery.

Ford Madox Brown's *The Pretty Baa-Lambs* presented a revolutionary idea to other painters. He painted the entire picture out of doors--for "five months of Hard Labor" in his words--to capture the true appearance of a subject set in bright daylight. (Dissatisfied with the picture's compositional balance, Brown made alterations to the painting in 1852-1853, and 1859.) It was a novel idea in 1851, though it became a commonplace for succeeding generations, including the Impressionists. His patience and perseverance were rewarded with entirely new observations: that sunlight, for instance, bleaches skin tone to a high, flat contrast, or that deep shadow gives a blueish cast to white material, while green grass takes on a darker shade of its own hue rather than blue or black. Brown's sitters were his future wife and their daughter, and he resisted the obvious religious interpretation of a Madonna and Child with the sheep as a symbolic flock.

Rossetti's mistress, Elizabeth Siddal, is the model for his *Beata Beatrix*, an idealized portrait of both the young model and the woman beloved by the Italian poet Dante. After Elizabeth Siddal's death, Rossetti fell in love with Jane Morris, William's wife; she is the subject of his famous *Proserpine*, the image which is emblematic of the Pre-Raphaelite view of women as both chaste and dangerous. *Pygmalion and the Image: The Hand Refrains* is Burne-Jones's definitive statement of the power that a woman's image can exert on an artist.

Women were important to the Pre-Raphaelites as subjects, muses, and only occasionally as companions and colleagues. Elizabeth Siddal was perhaps the most ill-fated of all the women who figure in the lives and loves of the Pre-Raphaelites. Of modest origins, she was "discovered" by one artist, sat for others, tried her hand at painting, fell in love with Rossetti and bore him a child, and died young, probably a suicide. William Morris stoically endured Rossetti's open affair with Jane Morris.

An ambitious schedule of public programs to be offered during **Visions of Love and Life** is listed in these press materials. Events include dramatic readings and thematic gallery talks planned to coincide with the museum's annual Summer Wednesday Evening Festivals. A catalogue also accompanies the exhibition. Fully illustrated in color, with essays by leading British art historians, it is available from the Cleveland Museum of Art store at $34.95 (paper).

The exhibition is drawn from the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, and is organized and circulated by Art Services International, Alexandria, Virginia. Support has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, the British Council, the Ohio Arts Council, and an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of Ginny and Jon Lindseth, Viki and Al Rankin, Sarah and Ed Roth, and Carol and Mike Sherwin for the Cleveland showing of this exhibition.

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